

ADAA7000 Coexistent Perspectives Module

Name: Katherine Harffey

Student number: 2221073

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How do contemporary creative practices engage with the
politics and poetics of space, considered from a post humanist and
post structuralist perspective?

Katherine Harffey

2221073

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Abstract

This essay examines the posthumanism and the poststructuralism theories up close alongside the digital media of video games and the exploration through the perception of the player with the key figures of posthumanism and poststructuralism as reference and comparison. I will investigate how different types of posthumans such as Cyborg, Mutant and Biological are depicted within the video game space and how it affects the perception of the player. The essay will discuss how space in a video game is looked at and changed by the player of the video game considering the role of escapism that video games provide for players and the effect on the player as a whole. This essay also examines the works of Matt Rhodes and John Howe from a contemporary and theorist point of view.

Introduction

In this essay I will be discussing posthumanism and post-structuralism theory as well as their definitions and key figures throughout. I will show examples of how these tie into the video game space and more specifically spaces within worlds and characters that have evolved past the human. I will be considering contemporary artists such as Matt Rhodes and John Howe, and discussing how their works have influenced different types of media and their processes of creation. The posthumanism and poststructuralism theory will be used to analyse how the space within video game design affects the role of the avatar and the different avatars within game play such as cyborg, mutant and biological posthuman. I will also look at the idea of escapism within video games and how that connects with the post humanism theory; the positives and negatives on the idea of video games being considered from an escapist point of view. In addition how poststructuralism affects the virtual space of a video game will be discussed and how it plays out within the narrative of the game.

Chapter 1

The definition of post-humanism is a critical standpoint of what it means to be human (Lorimar, 2009). It challenges how humans are connected within the world and possibly evolving past being human with some of the key figures within the theory being Donna Haraway, Karen Barad and Cary Wolfe. Poststructuralism is a theory that goes against the singularity of a space, something that can be created and defined by other people's perspectives, influenced by identities and different contexts (Jones, 2025). It works against the bigger narrative and on a smaller scale which can be utilised within the video game world. Poststructuralism doesn't have a singular founder, it emerged from France in the 1960s but one of the later known key figures within the theory was Jacques Derrida (Allen, 2023).

Video games have been an evolving form of entertainment for the past few decades and have been pushing the boundaries of the imaginary space and what human is. The book *The Cyborg Manifesto* by Donna Haraway describes humans as being cyborg and describes the cyborg being a condensed image between imaginative and materialistic reality which fits with the player's relationship with the avatar of the video game (Haraway, 2017). The avatar is referring to the character that the player takes on. The cyborg avatar is described as a character within a video game who has been altered using mechanical parts or given implants or chips that are created by machines for them to become a mix of human and cyborg (Edrei, 2014). For example, in the video game

Cyberpunk 2077 the world is set in a high-tech environment but it mostly resembles the real world. where most of the population have cybernetic implants or cybernetic prosthetics. These are known as *Cyberware* and throughout the production of *Cyberware* there have been countless generations of these implants or prosthetics. They were mostly created for helping people with their everyday lives and health issues as they also created artificial organs but there was a fear around them taking over the world which is very true to real life with the fears around AI (Wisefish, 2025). The characters within cyberpunk could be considered from a posthumanist perspective as they have upgraded themselves where the line is then blurred between human and cyborg . Another example of the cyborg post human within video games is *Detroit Become Human*. In this world, AI robots known as *Androids* are integrated into human society; humans feel threatened by these sentient beings becoming the majority. In this game options exist to play from three different perspectives of androids that look perfectly like humans the only difference between them and humans in the world is that *androids* have a blue circle on the side of their forehead and depending on what the *android's* occupation is, they wear a uniform with their model number displayed on it (Milesi,2022). The androids in the game also display human-like emotions that closely match real life human emotions. It resembles the conflict of AI and humans in real life and also blurs the lines of where does the AI start and where does the AI finish. Throughout the game there are hints to an underground movement known as Jericho where the androids who have rebelled against their roles within society to humans are known as *deviants*; androids who have gone against their built-in code. The goal of the group is that they want liberation and equal rights within the world, the same as humans

(Milesi,2022). This certainly takes a spin on the posthumanism theory as instead of the androids wanting to become more than human, they just want the same equal rights as humans and to live in a society where they can be as one. Within this world the line between human and cyborg is still blurred because the androids closely resemble humans with no clear differences except the aesthetics.

There are also other terms apart from cyborg to describe a human that's evolved beyond human within the video game space. Another term to describe a posthuman avatar, is what's known as a mutant; it describes a character that has been genetically altered by an event or through science (Edrei,2014). An example of this is in the video game *Fallout*. There are humans that have been altered in terms of their appearance and their lifespan due to the effects of radiation as in the year 2077 the fictional America dropped nuclear bombs and forced the population underground into vaults whilst people on the surface world succumbed to the effects of radiation. They became known as a sub species within the world known as ghouls with the process of becoming one known as ghoulfication. They have a zombie-like appearance (see figure 1). Scientists within the game found that some of them have become feral, losing all sense of their humanity. In this way the ghouls acted more like animals, with them relying on animal instincts to survive the world. Additionally some of them had prolonged lifespans such as *The Ghoul* from the *Fallout* tv series who has lived over 200 years. People who evolved into ghouls had faster recovery from injuries due to their genetically altered bodies and having the ability to reattach limbs that have been severed. This life state of becoming a ghoul has definitely become posthuman as they have evolved beyond

being human and having mutated enhancements and acting on animal instincts. The downside is that there is much discrimination from humans against the ghoule species within the world of *Fallout*. People fear them as in their belief, ghouls are always feral or that ghouls carry diseases that could be passed on. There are lots of communities that have banned ghouls from their local towns leading to ghouls creating their own communities within the world. Even in a post-apocalyptic world humans and ghouls are all the same except ghouls are evolving beyond humans due to the toxic surroundings.



Fig. 1: *The Ghoul* [photograph].

Biological avatar posthuman is a term that describes a character who hasn't been changed by any events or hasn't been genetically altered by science rather these biological post humans have been born with enhanced abilities such as being able to cast magic (Edrei,2014). In some video games like *Dragon Age* or *Baldur's Gate* elves are considered to be beyond the human due to most of the time elves being connected

to nature (BG3 Wiki, DA Wiki, 2026) which is in line with being posthuman. From the video game series *Fable*, a fantasy RPG, there are humans that are considered to be heroes which are humans from a long magical bloodline, who are able to wield magic known as will in the game. For example *The Hero of Oakvale* and *The Hero of Bowerlake* are two of the most powerful will users that you play as. In the game series throughout the game you can upgrade their willpower as well as other skills such as strength and skill; they have definitely gone beyond the average human within the world, but unfortunately in the later games the heroes become a dying bloodline (Heroes 2026). *The Hero of Brightwall*, another character you play as has to use steampunk style gauntlets in order to enhance their magic to be able to wield it properly. This allows them to dual wield different elements which as a character could make them the strongest posthuman within the game series. It makes them more powerful than their ancestors who are the previously mentioned heroes of Oakvale and Bower Lake (Heroes 2026).

Most avatars in video games are customizable to the player in terms of appearance, but only a few avatars in video games start out as human. In fantasy genre style video games such as *Dragon Age* and *Baldur's Gate 3* you can change your appearance into humanoid races such as elves or dwarfs with their varying sub races or you can choose to be races inspired by creatures such as devils or dragons. These races are known as *Dragonborn* and *Tieflings*. According to recent stats in *Baldur's Gate 3* (see figure 2) elves are the most popular choice of race as they have the best perks of any race so that might be why players opt for them. Players can build the strongest posthuman.

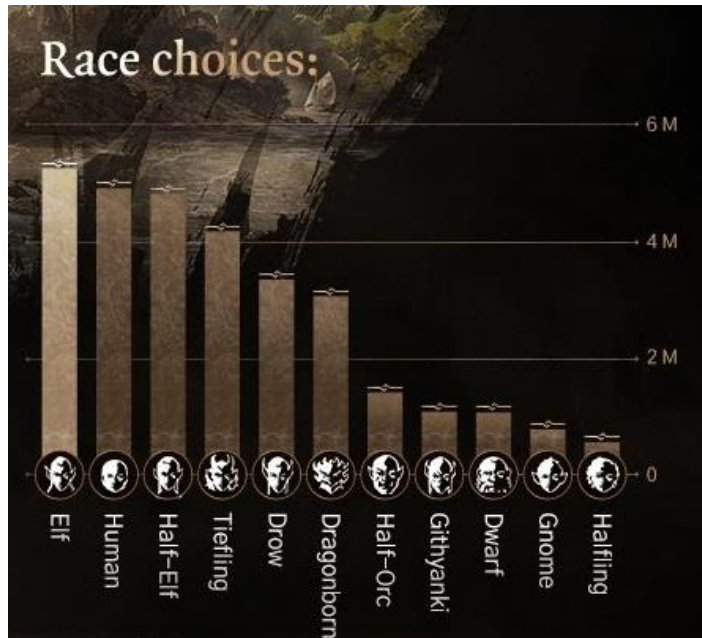


Fig. 2 – Stats from Baldur's gate 3 [photograph]

In games such as *Skyrim* or *Fallout* players have access to a skill tree which can enhance abilities that players unlock throughout the game making their characters able to do things regular everyday people cannot such as have a longer life span, cast spells at will or being hard to hit (Skyrim Wiki, Fallout Wiki, 2026). They can also become indestructible but without upgrading within the game you are dooming your avatar for a hard path towards the games goal. Games are actively encouraging the player to become stronger and invest in upgrades. Players who play these games have the option to go beyond being a boring human as becoming more than a human can expand the skillsets players can learn throughout the game which is pushing beyond the human limit.

A lot of video games will usually let you have creative range over characters and how you choose to upgrade your characters but a lot of story based games will not let you have your own choices as your avatar or autonomy over your avatar for narrative or plot driven reasons. For example, in the video game *Baldur's gate 3* in the beginning you are stuck on a mind flayer ship called *The Nautiloid* where against the avatar's own will a Mindflayer tadpole is inserted into your head and you are stuck with it for the majority of the game. There are some points in the game where you are forced to give into its powers as it is controlling your mind. Throughout the game you as the player/avatar are heavily encouraged to give into the tadpole's influence, by a Mindflayer called *The Emperor* (see figure 3) who is a part of your party and has found by becoming a Mindflayer he has found himself more powerful and able to do things he could not do in his human form. This is an example of becoming more than human within the posthumanism theory as the emperor sees his human form as weak (leaves,2024).The tadpole affects the player making them posthuman as whilst the tadpole is within their brain the outside source of the tadpole is a creature known as *The Elder Brain*. *The Elder brains* origin is surrounded in mystery, but it is believed to be a collective of mind flayers in its final life stage and has ascended to be a god of sorts not just controlling the player but is controlling a whole colony of infected people (D&D Wiki 2026).



Fig. 3 – *The emperor* [photograph]

Poststructuralism in video games has two main components; the space and structure of the game and the narrative of the game. There is always a structure to a video game ranging from simplistic with some narrative elements to complex and almost a living breathing world. Most video games follow a beginning, middle and end narrative with little events known as Sidequests to make up the framework of a video game but sometimes there are video games where players can create their own storyline or goalposts for tasks they would like to accomplish. For example, *Minecraft* is a sandbox game where you as the player can create anything you want to without the restriction of a limited world or gravity; you can create buildings in the sky without them falling to the ground. *Minecraft* as a whole is not known as a fixed or linear experience. The game is always changing with new landscapes every time the player explores somewhere new or when the player builds something new within the game or when other players join the world and co-operate to create a shared structure. Throughout the game there are two modes, creative and survival. Creative is more aimed at people who just want to build their ideas without hostile mobs in the game or the day and night cycle which is more poststructuralist than survival mode as there are less limits for players to create their own world. Survival is more aimed at people who want to have the challenge of collecting everything rather than having it at their disposal (Burnett C, Merchant G 2017) . Some people do consider *Minecraft* to have an ending to the game when you beat the strongest mob in the game *The Ender dragon*, but the narrative doesn't stop there, you as the player can continue to build and create within the sandbox world (Minecraft Wiki, 2026).

One of the other main keypoints within poststructuralism that is tied to video games is the narrative. Video game narratives are often unpredictable and greatly complex and us as the players reading and watching the narrative, dependent on what character the player portrays, will also take part in the narrative and telling of the story, projecting their voice through the game as well as impersonating the avatar. In game communication through the narrative through visuals sounds and written dialog style text they are responsible for the protagonist to help guide them through the story's narrative. The players are in charge of progressing the story and plot of the game. In some cases, the player has no control over the events of the stories but overall, the players tend to have two roles within the space of a video game being the narrator and the audience at the same time. Thabet T (2014)

When players are being told the story through an in-game narrator, the narrator's tone of voice can definitely influence what kind of tone is set for the player throughout the game. For example, in *Baldur's gate 3* the narrator is a constant presence within the game alongside the player character but depending on who you choose to play in the game the narrator's voice changes to accommodate the character the player chooses. There are a total of seventeen narration styles within the game's files. You can choose to play as an origin character which are characters that in normal gameplay are NPCS to your avatar to interact with and form in game relationships with them. The narrator's style is more talking to the origin character which can feel to the player like the narrator isn't talking to you. They are talking to the character you are impersonating. Another example is an evil character called *The Dark Urge* this path for the player is known as

the evil playthrough this character you portray has an urge to kill and you can choose to suppress it or give in to the urge the tone of voice used towards the player is almost animalistic in tone (Eurogamer 2024).

Why do people play video games? A lot of the reasons are that they provide a challenge for people or socialisation but the biggest reason among people who consume video games is the idea of escapism from everyday life. Being immersed in a video game can divert from the real-life issues that arise every day that take a mental toll on people. There are definitely negative side effects from this intense escapism such as having a negative mood or bad mental health but there are also positives such as having a positive mood or better mental health from having that time to relax and play video games (Hussian U 2020).

The outlook for escapism in video games also differs on different sides of the world, for example in western countries escapism through video games is seen as negative whereas within non-western countries the idea is seen as positive. People use video games as a coping mechanism as they can embody their avatar and be powerful and can experience and do more with the capabilities of becoming their character and being more than the human they are in everyday life. A downside to escapism within video games is that people can develop an addiction towards the video game or even become lost within the identity of their character (Hussian U 2020). A lot of video games have quests or in game problems to solve, and for somebody who might be struggling with their mental health, having the video game quests to solve can be a comfort if they

struggle to solve real life problems. Even if you must make a big choice in a video game that could benefit the player or have a negative outcome, players can always reload the save to avoid the bad choice which is something players cannot do in real life. Open world video games provide a sense of freedom and their own autonomy to players as they are free to do whatever they want within the space of the game as there are minimal restrictions for players as a whole. Players are able to set their own goals and interact with the activities in a video game as they please. This links back to the poststructuralism theory as whilst the space has been created it is up to the player how they use and create their own stories within that space (Diamond 2022).



Fig. 4: *Dragon Age* [Illustration]

Matt Rhodes is an artist (see figure 4) who focuses on the storytelling aspects of video games and as he wants the viewer of the game or story to be able to visualize and interpret through the use of efficient images that tell the viewer exactly what the story is about. He describes concept art as 'half blueprints and half inspiration' (Rhodes,2015) and at the company BioWare as lead artist it helps everyone from all different backgrounds of art disciplines get on the same page about what they are trying to produce for viewers. When asked about the process of concept art he says that there are '3 pillars of concept art conversation, skill and research.' (Rhodes,2015) When he designs characters he focuses on things that will support the protagonist, Non-Player able Character (NPC) or creature that will effectively tell whoever's story is being told at the moment (Rhodes,2015).

His work connects to the posthumanism theory within in the characters he creates as whilst there are some human characters he's designed they are just human on the surface as a lot of these characters have superhuman strength or incredible precision with traps or creating potions or poisons which makes these characters very adept at fighting or disarming traps or they are adept at magic for example in dragon age inquisition Dorian Pavus a human mage is adept at a rare and almost outlawed magic known as necromancy which makes him unique and powerful to the game as he is the only one who can use it (Fandom 2026). or another example from dragon age 2 a character known as Fenris is an elf fighter whilst elves within the world have a magical aura within them he has a unique ability where his skin has been infused with lyrium which gives him the power to phase through solid objects (Fandom 2026). Both of these characters have definitely gone beyond the normalcy of being a human

In terms of how his work is connected to poststructuralism his environmental work makes the viewer feel as though they are existing within the space of the world especially within the grand buildings or the dark small spaces there's a sense of magic within these concepts (see fig 5).



Fig. 5 – *Dragon Age* [Illustration]

John Howe is an artist that is most well-known for his work on *The hobbit* and *The lord of the rings* franchise he worked as a lead concept artist for both of John Tolkien's trilogies along with artist Alan lee and has recently worked as a concept artist on the amazon series rings of power. He has also illustrated and done book cover art for a range of different books within the world of middle earth which range from *The Silmarillion* published in 1977 but john howe did the cover for the 1992 version, *The history of middle earth* (see fig 6 and 7) which was a series of books published between

1983 to 1996 published by Christopher Tolkien who is John Tolkien's son (Tolkien gateway 2025) .

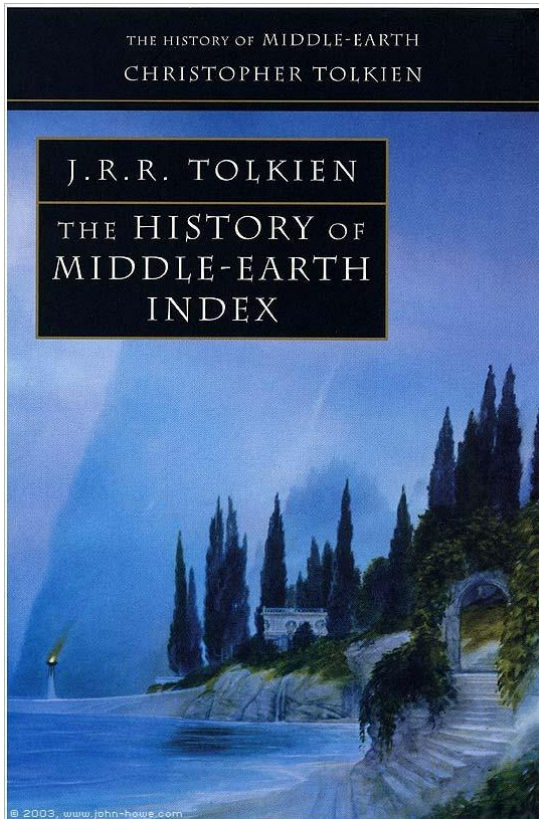


Fig. 6 and 7 - *The history of middle earth* and *The Silmarillion* [illustration]

In order for John Howe to bring to life the concepts of *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, he used a lot of traditional media such as watercolour and pencils. As a concept artist, he has a very neat style about the way he goes about creating these concepts. He has found that creating the concepts when objects or characters have been transformed in real life is incredibly helpful (Festival art books 2021). As his main influence for *Gandalf*, his appearance was of Iain McKellen as the director of the franchise Peter Jackson had him

in mind to portray the great wizard, he enjoys drawing dragons and he is very drawn towards drawing villains (Goldstein 2014). In terms of how his work connects within the theories the environments he creates are very realistic looking and inviting to the viewer it helps that he's had Tolkien's many years of different kinds of books within the world of middle earth to help elevate his work. Even his creature designs which also connect within the posthumanism theory as they are connected to the fictional world of middle earth almost jump out of the pages at you. Middle earth from a posthumanism standpoint is also considered as a place that has evolved beyond being human, as the lines between all the living people and creatures are blurred and are interdependent of each other a good example of this is the elves of middle earth are very intertwined with the nature of middle earth and draws on it for their powers.



Fig. 8 – Smaug The Dragon [illustration]

In conclusion, chapter 1 of this essay covered the theories of posthumanism and poststructuralism and how both of these theories tie into the video game space. Video games as mentioned have been pushing the boundaries of what a video game is. It was found that during research there are 3 different types of posthumans considered within the video game space these were called cyborg, which is directly related to Donna Harraways *Cyborg Manifesto*, Mutant which are altered humans by an event or the environment around them. As well as biological which are posthumans born with abilities such as magic, this essay covered a lot of comparison characters such as

people with cyberware, androids, ghouls and heroes. As well as reasons for these characters to be looked at from a posthumanist perspective. This essay also covered why people opt for different races to play as in a fantasy setting video game as well as players building their characters through the skill tree some video games provide and how a lot of the time players pick the non-human race which means building a strong posthuman avatar. The ending of chapter 1 concluded with the events of *Baldur's gate 3* and how the Player/Avatar is posthuman because they are being controlled by a higher entity and another source of influence.

In chapter 2 of this essay, It covered poststructuralism within video game worlds and how there are two main components them being the structure and space and the narrative and narrator this essay looked further into this by looking at minecraft being an open sandbox world with little to no restrictions on the player and how the world the players are interacting with is always changing. In terms of the narration and narrator through research it was found that the tone can change depending on the setting of the game as well as who you chose to play and how dialog with the narrator changes. In chapter 2 this essay also looked at why people play video games and what challenges it provides for players as well as the idea of escapism within video games, It looked at the positives and negatives on a person's wellbeing and mental health in immersing yourself within your avatar and within the world you are playing in. As well as quests or goalposts within a video game might be a comfort for someone struggling with solving problems in real life. Towards the end of the chapter this essay looked at artists Matt Rhodes and John Howe what they've done work on and how they go about their creative processes

within their chosen media and how their work can be interpreted as posthumanist and poststructuralist.

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Additional links

[Dead gods — Matt Rhodes Art](#)

[ArtStation - Matt Rhodes](#)

[Matt Rhodes \(@mattrhodesart\) • Instagram photos and videos](#)

[Matt Rhodes - YouTube](#)

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List of Illustrations

Figure 1 – Fandom (2026) *The Ghoul* [photograph] Available at:

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Figure 2 – Nichegamer (2023) Baldur's gate 3 stats [photograph] available at:

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Figure 3 – BG3 Wiki (2026) *The emperor* [photograph] available at:

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Figure 4 - An illustration by Matt Rhodes from the book dragon age inquisition the art of inquisition [illustration]

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Figure 8 - a concept of Smaug from the hobbit movies created by john howe [illustration]

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